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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 001037

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2014

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SUBJECT: POLITICS AND PORK OVERTAKE SCIENCE IN CROATIA'S
GMO POLICY

REF: (A) ZAGREB 578 (B) 03 ZAGREB 2224

Classified By: Econoff Joshua Harris for reasons 1.5(b,d).

Summary

1. (C) After initial tests in February first raised the prospect of unlabeled GMOs in the Croatian food market (reftel A), the GoC has thoroughly politicized the GMO debate and shown an eagerness to cash in on populist anti-GMO sentiment to drum up support. A move in GMO policy away from science could potentially limit markets for US soy and corn exports to Croatia. The establishment of a previously mandated agency charged with coordinating food safety analysis in line with EU standards has been accelerated and politicized. Even before the testing scandal broke, the HDZ-led coalition shifted lead responsibility for GMOs from the Ministry of Environment to the Ministry of Culture. As responsibility for GMO policy within the GoC becomes increasingly diffuse and GoC officials responsible for food policy show an unnerving disinterest in scientific arguments, prospects for government involvement in countering anti-GMO propaganda are slim. END SUMMARY.

Fanning the flames

2. (U) Following February's report that a now-discredited biotech lab in Osijek had identified 14 domestically available food samples that contained GMO components (reftel A), the possible presence of GMOs in Croatian food has featured prominently in the media and public statements by high-level government officials. On the heels of the first tests, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management Petar Cobankovic tasked the Institute for Public Health (IPH) -- the only internationally certified lab capable of detecting GMO material in food products -- with following-up and identifying which specific products violate strict Croatian laws on licensing and labeling of GMOs. The IPH reports that up to 700 products have been tested so far this year (compared with less than 40 last year).

3. (U) Minister of Health and Deputy Prime Minister Andrije Hebrang drew wide criticism for ignoring calls to identify specific products with possible GMO components. At an April 30 press conference, Hebrang cited likely undeserved financial hardship to businesses and fears over job losses in refusing to divulge the product names. Confirming that there was no health risk because all offending products had been "destroyed," Hebrang's refusal to name names prompted Croatian Television to accuse him of putting the concern of a few hundred food workers above 4.5 million Croatian citizens, and several food producers to independently issue statements that GMOs are not used in their products.

4. (U) After weeks of media speculation and anticipation, Cobankovic used a May 13 press conference on changes to farm subsidy regulations to announce the final results: of 37 products tested, 36 contained no GMOs above the 0.9% threshold and one borderline case merited further retesting. In stark contrast to the frenzy leading up to the announcement, Cobankovic's exculpatory statement received scant media attention.

The new food safety agency smells like pork

5. (C) The Ministry of Agriculture has recently politicized the establishment of a new food safety agency by relocating it outside the capital and apparently favoring patronage over expertise in choosing the agency's management. The new agency will have lead responsibility for food analysis while the inspection competence will remain with the IPH. Though mandated by law in 2003 and considered an essential step towards fulfilling EU consumer protection requirements by

both pro-GMO scientists and anti-GMO NGOs alike, the manner of the agency's creation has sounded alarms that HDZ is using the agency more for pork than consumer protection.

16. (C) While the setup of the agency has been in the works for months, in a surprise move in March the GoC decided to locate the agency in Osijek (270km east of Zagreb). Bozic informed us that a managing board of scientists and food safety experts from Osijek would run the agency while State Secretary for Agriculture Dragan Kovacevic (from Osijek)

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would oversee it. Though Bozic acknowledged the agency seemed to have recently taken a decidedly political turn, he assured us that we would be able to "swallow" the managing board's membership once it is made public.

17. (C) At Bozic's suggestion, we met with Kovacevic on May 28 to discuss the manner of the food safety agency's establishment. Kovacevic took great pains to assure us the agency's managing board would consist exclusively of scientists and experts well-trained in food safety issues. EU consumer protection legislation rather than politicking would dictate the board's membership. Nevertheless, whereas Kovacevic's predecessor was willing to privately acknowledge benefits to GMO technology even as he publically echoed the GoC's anti-GMO line, Kovacevic himself seems both professionally and personally inclined to oppose any GMO introduction into Croatia. Kovacevic unambiguously informed us that no GMO crops would be planted in Croatian soil even as he stressed that Croatian agricultural policy was all but determined by the EU.

18. (C) Kovacevic saw little role for the Ministry of Agriculture or the new food agency in public education on GMO safety. When asked about any programs in the works to balance an aggressive NGO-led anti-GMO campaign, Kovacevic stated simply, "We're not trying to promote GMOs but rather 'healthy foods.'"

Making nature protection a cultural issue? "Stupid!"

19. (SBU) A shift in "nature protection" responsibility -- including both national parks and GMO crop regulation -- from the Ministry of Environmental Protection to the Ministry of Culture earlier this year has left the authority to regulate GMO introduction in Croatia in the hands of a disinterested ministry and clouded responsibility for GoC response to GMO concerns. The 2003 Law on the Protection of Nature (Reftel B) originally tasked the Ministry of Environment (in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture) with regulating the importation, transshipment, production, usage, or sale of GMO seeds and crops for introduction into nature in line with the Cartagena Protocol. The HDZ-led government shifted this nature protection authority to the Ministry of Culture -- but provided no additional funding or staff to fulfill this broadened mandate.

110. (C) During a May 19 meeting on bilateral cultural cooperation, the Ambassador raised the GMO issue with Minister of Culture Bozo Biskupic. At the mention of GMOs, Biskupic threw up his hands and exclaimed, "This is stupid!" According to Biskupic, the Ministry of Culture has no interest in the GMO issue and stressed that no one in his Ministry knew anything about the topic. Biskupic is actively seeking to push the nature protection portfolio to either the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Agriculture. (NOTE: Based on his visceral reaction to the question, Minister Biskupic does not seem prepared to coordinate permits for GMO release as required by the 2003 law. END NOTE.)

111. (C) Moving responsibility for nature protection from Environment to Culture has prompted wide criticism from scientists, NGOs, and even the EU. Krunoslav Capak and Marijan Katalenic of the food safety division at the Institute for Public Health criticized GoC efforts to divide a limited number of experts trained in food safety issues among different ministries but expressed optimism that EU pressure could prompt change. NGOs simultaneously view the move as a step away from coordinated environmental protection and food policy and an assertion of Croatia's right to organize its government however it chooses. Irena Brnada, Director of the Regional Environmental Center office in Croatia, singled out Minister of Environment Marina Matunkovic-Dropulic as the likely instigator of the reorganization, citing her desire to focus on the construction portfolio instead of GMOs. Jagoda Munic, director of the influential Green Action NGO, defended Matunkovic-Dropulic as a strong proponent of the anti-GMO movement.

112. (C) Academics, NGOs, and even the Ministry of Environment itself all expect the GMO portfolio to eventually revert to

either the Ministry of Environment or Ministry of Agriculture. While the IPH suggested the move was imminent and a direct response to EU pressure, high-level officials in the Ministry of Environment claimed they had no more than

"rumors" about restructuring and that the Ministry of Culture could retain lead authority on GMO crop issues for many months.

Comment: All food politics is local

113. (C) Though follow-up tests have all but shown early fears of GMOs in Croatian food were overblown, the GoC has shown a willingness to use the GMO issue to pander to public worries.

Scientists active in food safety policy-making expressed dismay that by moving responsibility for GMO analysis and education away from the technical experts, the GoC has been ceding ground to a well-organized NGO-led, anti-GMO campaign.

114. (SBU) Public opinion research on GMO attitudes and awareness has primarily been done by NGOs with a priori conceptions of the results. GoC officials stress that they have no role in public education. Srecko Jelenic, Director of the Croatian Association of Genetic Engineers, offered that the government has refused to fund public opinion research for fear of alienating an anti-GMO public.

115. (C) Scientists, government officials, and NGOs all acknowledge that the GMO debate in Croatia is temporary. As Croatia moves closer to the EU and harmonizes food regulation with EU norms, hopes of making Croatia "GMO-free" (reftel A) should fade. Yet in the short-term, the GoC can channel GMO fears into political support by sidelining science and focusing on emotion. As long as GMO authority rests with an uninterested ministry and multiple agencies with unclear mandates vie for control of GoC GMO policy, the government is poorly positioned to counter rampant anti-GMO propaganda from the media and NGOs.
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